R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 012 662 RC 001 161

RURAL YOUTH IN A CHANGING PUERTO RICO.

BY- BRAM, JOSEPH

NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

PUB DATE SEP 63

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.64 16P.

DESCRIPTORS- *AGRICULTURE, *FOREIGN COUNTRIES, FOREIGN CULTURE, HISTORY, *LIVING STANDARDS, PUBLIC HEALTH, RURAL AREAS, *RURAL YOUTH, RURAL ENVIRONMENT, URBAN AREAS, URBAN MIGRATION, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, PUERTO RICO

THE HISTORY OF PUERTO RICO SHOWS THAT THE LAST 20 YEARS OF PLANNED PROGRESS UNDER ITS FREE POLITICAL STATUS HAVE PRODUCED INDUSTRIAL AND AGRICULTURAL REFORMS WHICH HAVE BROUGHT A HIGHER STANDARD OF LIVING TO THE RURAL AREAS. THESE IMPROVEMENTS HAVE CREATED A DESIRE FOR THE URBAN WAY OF LIFE WHICH HAS RESULTED IN AN EXODUS OF RURAL YOUTH. THIS PAPER WAS PREPARED FOR PRESENTATION AT THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PROBLEMS OF RURAL YOUTH IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT (SEPTEMBER 1963). (SF)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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ED012662

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Dr. Joseph Bram
New York University

National Committee for Children and Youth
1145 Nineteenth Street, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20036

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Prepared for

The National Conference on Problems of Rural Youth
in a Changing Environment

September 1963

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ABSTRACT

Puerto Rico is a small island of some 3,500 square miles with a population of 2,350,000. Discovered by Columbus in 1493, it has a history of 470 years. The absence of coal, oil and mineral resources has restricted Puerto Rican economy to agricultural production. Coffee, tabacco and sugar cane are its primary crops. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the Island was controlled by Spanish bureaucrats, army men, the clergy and absentee landowners. The cultivators of the soil were Negro slaves and improverished isolated peasants of the mountain country (jibaros). By the end of the nineteenth century the middle classes had grown in numbers and in political importance. At the same time slavery was abolished (in 1873) and the emancipated slaves joined the ranks of the growing army of landless plantation workers. Puerto Rico was ceded by Spain to the United States in 1898. The first four decades of the American rule were marked by the concentration of plantation land in the hands of a few large absentee-corporations. The growing population of the Island vegetated on a very low level of subsistence (estimated at about $250 a year per rural family). The last twenty years have been marked by numerous social, economic and political reforms in the life of Puerto Rico which has become a showcase of planned progress under its new political status of the Free Associated Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. These reforms have reached into the hills of the interior and have made electricity, drinking water, low-cost housing, telephones, improved roads and schools available to a large section of the rural masses. Beneficial as all these measures have been they appear to have created a widespread desire for the urban way of life among the younger people of rural Puerto Rico. Thus paradoxically rural improvements may be threatening the very existence of small independent farming unable to compete with the movies, the supermarkets and the sidewalk excitement of the cities. The old folk-culture of the hill country is also disappearing rapidly, and the traditional low status of rural women is under attack by the forces of urbanism and modern education. One wonders whether a substantial proportion of rural youth will not abandon the countryside where their ancestors had lived under infinitely less satisfactory material conditions for generations.

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by

Dr. Joseph Bram

Professor of Anthropology
New York University

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This essay is about rural youth in Puerto Rico. Since information about the Island and its people is not as widespread as might be desirable, it may be useful to set the stage with a few general descriptive remarks.

Puerto Rico is the most easterly of the Greater Antilles, lying 1,600 miles southeast of New York and 965 miles from Key West, Florida.

The Island is rectangular in shape measuring about 95 miles long from east to west, and 35 miles wide from north to south. It covers an area of 3,435 square miles, or slightly more than three times the size of Rhode Island.

Three main geological formations characterize the Island: a central mountainous core of rugged appearance, about 4,000 feet above sea level; an elevated area surrounding the central mountain chains, with lateral ridges and deep gorges cutting through it; and the coastal plain with numerous bays and lagoons along the seashore.

Puerto Rico has no known stores of coal or oil nor any metals or minerals in such quantities as would justify their commercial exploitation. In brief its natural wealth is almost entirely agricultural. The soil of the Island is best along the coastline, but has been cultivated for centuries without much effort to maintain its fertility. The value of the soil in the higher mountain area is inferior to that of the coast.

CLIMATE

The average temperature for the Island is 73 degrees (F) during the coolest month and 79 degrees (F.) during the warmest. Land and sea breezes contribute to the overall mildness of the atmosphere. Throughout the Island rainfall is distributed less evenly than temperature. In general the northern part of the Island has much more rain than its southern half.

Puerto Rico lies in the path of the notorious West Indian hurricanes. They tend to occur during the months of August, September and October. A severe hurricane can inflict massive damage on coffee and fruit trees and on sugarcane and tobacco plantations which constitute the basis of Puerto Rican economy. These hurricanes are, however, sufficiently spaced (about

five major ones in fifty years) so as not to make the agricultural development of the Island a hopeless proposition.

POPULATION

Puerto Rico is one of the most thickly populated areas on the face of the earth. After Spain had ceded the Island to the United States (1898), the first American census taken in 1899 showed a population of 953,000. By 1960 the population had risen to 2,350,000, and at this juncture the population density of Puerto Rico is well over 700 persons per square mile.

The pressure of a growing population has been somewhat relieved by mass migration of Puerto Rican families to continental United States. The greater New York area alone is estimated to have attracted between 650,000 and 700,000 Puerto Rican migrants within the last 20 years.

Campaigns for birth control have met with considerable success on the Island in spite of the strong opposition on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. But the impact of planned parenthood on total population figures has been weakened by the rising life expectancy of the population, brought about by improved nutrition and by comprehensive advances in public health.

In considering the problems of rural youth in Puerto Rico the growing population of the Island must be constantly kept in mind. Thus, rural isolation is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. The fast-growing suburbs of the cities are invading and "digesting" small scattered hamlets. New highways and byways bring urban influences into sedate and somnolent communities.

It goes without saying that this rapid growth of population calls for a constant expansion of housing, public utilities (water, gas, electricity, telephones, etc.), medical and educational services, and, ultimately, of course, of industrial and agricultural production.

In an impoverished and economically "underdeveloped" society this cannot be accomplished without centralized economic planning. Thus rural life in Puerto Rico has become the object of comprehensive transformation under a vast program of welfare economy.

THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES OF PUERTO RICAN HISTORY

The discovery of Puerto Rico by Columbus took place on the 19th of November 1493 during his second voyage to the New World.

At the time of discovery the Island had a relatively large Indian population (of Arawak stock). In order to work the gold mines (since then exhausted) the Spaniards introduced the system of repartimientos, i.e., they distributed a fixed number of Indians among early settlers. Before long violent rebellions broke out among the aborigines. By the end of the sixteenth century not more than 1,500 Indians remained on the Island.

As soon as forced Indian labor had been proved impractical, African slaves were introduced into Puerto Rico. By 1531 there were 1,500 Negro slaves on the Island, and by the end of the sixteenth century, Negro hands had replaced Indian labor throughout the Island economy.

The concentration of slave labor in the better developed coastal zones had the effect of driving poorer white settlers into the mountainous interior of the Island. Their living conditions in the mountain country were marked by primitive housing, scarcity of manufactured goods, and virtual cultural isolation. These circumstances shaped them gradually into a social type known locally under the name of los jibaros. These rural folk resemble greatly the impoverished hill people of the Southern Appalachian area in the United States. They are "poor but proud", distrust and dislike city people, often scorn public authorities and have their own cultural tradition consisting among other features of home-made string instruments, songs and dances, tales and superstitions, and local rules of social etiquette.

THE MILITARY ROLE OF PUERTO RICO

To understand Puerto Rico, it is also important to remember that through three centuries of its early history (i.e. to the end of the eighteenth century) numerous attempts had been made to wrest the Island from Spanish control. On various occasions the small garrison of the Island had repulsed landing parties of the French, British or Dutch, or had suffered through a long siege behind the walls of the fortress El Morro. These events had a retarding effect on the development of the Island economy and society. The military were in command, labor was deflected into the building of fortifications, and the Island was administered primarily as a military outpost guarding the access to the Spanish possessions in Central and South America.

PUERTO RICO IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

During the nineteenth century the general character of Puerto Rican society underwent radical changes. The military function of the Island was made superfluous by the emancipation of successive Central and South American provinces from the Spanish rule.

As soon as these provinces gained political independence numerous Spanish loyalists (with families and slaves) migrated to Puerto Rico. Simultaneously the Island began to attract French settlers from Louisiana and from Haiti as well as other immigrants from France, Ireland, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The coastal towns (San Juan, Ponce, Mayaguez, and others) began to expand. In 1812 the first printing press was installed on the Island. A few private schools and two or three small libraries made their appearance. Puerto Rico had entered the urban - commercial phase of its social history.

The growing urban society of the Island did not escape the influence of the American and the French revolutions and of the revolutionary struggles throughout Spanish America. The expression of local discontent, however, never went beyond minor disturbances, some of which had met with severe repressive measures. At the same time, reflecting temporary triumphs of liberalism in Spain itself, Puerto Rico also underwent several waves

of reformism. Thus, by the time the Island was ceded to the United States, it had acquired a fair amount of political consciousness and evolved political movements and parties led by eloquent, literate, and dedicated men.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS BY THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The liveliness of city life on the coast and increasing commercial activities throughout the nineteenth century had not seriously affected the basic economic structure of the Island society. Puerto Rico was still living under a patriarchal plantation system with a large number of landless workers - free or slave. After the abolition of slavery in 1873 the emancipated slaves simply joined the ranks of free farmhands. Both these groups lived in stark misery.

We read in the 1899 Report on Civil Affairs of Porto Rico by the United States Military Governor of the Island, Brigadier General George W. Davis the following:

"So great is their poverty that they are always in debt to the proprietors or merchants. They live in huts made of sticks and poles covered with thatches of palm leaves. A family of a dozen may be huddled together in one room, often with only a dirt floor. They have little food worthy of the name and only the most scanty clothing, while children of less than seven or eight years of age are often entirely naked. A few may own a machete or a hoe, but more have no worldly possessions whatever. Their food is fruit, and if they are wage-earners, a little rice and codfish in addition..."

This Report does not make a clear distinction between landless laborers and small independent farmers of the jibaro class. Actually some of the land-owning farmers were somewhat better off than most of the wage-earners, and a few among them were in a position to employ farmhands from time to time.

Returning to the situation of the landless agricultural workers we read about them 30 years later in a survey study by the Brookings Institution published in 1930 as follows:

"A daily wage of 70 cents, with employment four days out of seven represents approximately the earnings of the larger part of the daily laboring population. It is doubtful if the average income of the rural workers in Puerto Rico exceeds $150 a year. The earnings of wife and children, together with supplemental income from the cultivation of small parcels of land, the raising of poultry and livestock, increases the income of the average rural family to something like $250 to $275 a year."*

While sugar cane as a rule was cultivated on plantations of several hundred acres in size, small independent farmers were primarily growers of coffee and tobacco. Not many of them could match their income with that of sugar-cane plantation owners. Coffee and tobacco were also more vulnerable

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* Porto Rico and Its Problems, Survey Staff, Victor S. Clark, Director. The Brookings Institution. Washington, D. C. 1930, p. XIX

to hurricanes than sugar cane. Moreover, small farmers were at the mercy of local banks and store-keepers and did not often have the competence and the financial means necessary to get the highest possible price for their produce.

The sugar cane plantations thus represented the most stable source of wealth on the Island, and their absentee-owners were able to lead fairly comfortable lives in the cities of the coast and even in Europe.

PUERTO RICO UNDER AMERICAN RULE

The record of the American administration of Puerto Rico has never been uniformly all good or all bad. In 1900 Congress made a serious effort to protect the people of Puerto Rico from being dispossessed of their land by restricting to 500 acres the ownership of sugar-cane plantations by agricultural corporations. In practice, however, this excellent law was virtually ignored until about 1941, and by that time a few major corporations had succeeded in acquiring half of all the cultivated land. On their lands these corporations had established a kind of a state within a state, with storekeepers, local banks, small town lawyers, plantation foremen, and unskilled labor doing their bidding.

In the meantime, the previously important coffee-growing sector of the Island economy had been destroyed by the loss of European markets, the absence of tariff protection, and by several disastrous hurricanes.

The great depression of the thirties in the United States had the most dramatic effect on the economy of Puerto Rico. In 1940 the Works Project Administration (WPA) certified that 40 percent of the Island's families were "needy". At that point sugar cane workers were earning 15 cents an hour when employed, whereas their wives and daughters could supplement the family budget by doing needlework in the home at the rate of four to five cents an hour.

The successive American administrations had failed to develop any comprehensive program of rehabilitation for Puerto Rico, but did contribute a large number of piecemeal measures in such areas as road-building, medical services, elementary education, agricultural research, and others.

THE ERA OF MAJOR CHANGES

The tempo of social and economic reforms changed drastically in the forties. In 1941 the Land Act made it possible to implement the 1900 Law restricting land ownership to 500 acres. Excess land which was held unlawfully was acquired by the government and either turned into proportional benefit cooperative farms or made accessible to small farmers under favorable conditions. Landless workers who were living as squatters (agregados) on their employers' lands were provided with subsistence plots as well as with lots for privately owned homes.

Finally the 81st Congress of the United States in 1952 approved the new constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, which provided the Island with an unprecedented political status, guaranteeing it a maximum of autonomy

under American auspices. Thus was born the Free Associated State (or Nation) of Puerto Rico (Estado Libre Asociado) and an impetus was given to the elites of the Island for a drastic revamping of its social and economic institutions. These elites had earlier found their leader in the person of the dynamic statesman Luis Munoz Marin. As head of the majority party (Partido Popular Democratico) and later on Governor of the Island, he has been in charge of its destiny since 1940.

THE REFORMS SINCE 1952

Specific problems in the life of present day Puerto Rico must be viewed against the background of the administration headed by Governor Munoz Marin. A few of his policies should be mentioned at this juncture. A major effort has been made to attract to the Island American industrial capital. Special tax incentives and comparatively less costly labor have accomplished this goal, and a large number of new industries have been created on the Island. By 1962 some 59,000 industrial jobs have been made available, and the 4-year economic plan (1964 to 1967) is aiming at an additional 35,000 industrial jobs. The growth of industry has been accompanied by an island-wide development of highways and by a planned expansion of water-works and an increased production of electric power.

DEVELOPMENTS IN AGRICULTURE

The stress on new industries has not been accomplished by a sacrifice of the rural sector. According to the census of 1960 268,600 Puerto Rican families were residing in rural areas. By the end of 1962 the network of water-works had reached some 142,000 of them, and by 1968 this number is expected to rise to 193,500.

In 1962 electricity was available to 214,000 rural families. Within four years all rural areas will have access to electric power and light.

By the end of 1962 some 15,000 low-cost rural homes were completed under government auspices. Another 16,000 homes are to be built in rural areas by 1968.

Similar data could be given regarding the developments in public health, elementary and secondary education, the expansion of the telephone network, and the building and improvement of rural roads.

Along with improvements in living conditions, efforts have been directed toward a more basic rehabilitation of agriculture itself. This has taken the form of government sponsored projects of irrigation, planned diversification of crops, distribution of insecticides and other pest controls, and concerted efforts to bring back to health the formerly profitable growing of coffee.

PUERTO RICAN RURAL YOUTH IN THE CHANGING WORLD

The avalanche of planned progress in rural areas has met with different reactions on the part of traditional farmers and of their sons and daughters. The older generation has come to identify itself completely with the rural way

of life. They do not feel attracted to the cities of the coast or to the continental United States. Some of them feel city-shy and view themselves as inadequate for the urban ways of life. Thus resigned as they are to go on working in their familiar mountain world, they welcome any improvements in their living and working conditions. In fact, they remember only too well the hunger, sickness, and isolation which marked their existence in the recent past and appreciate keenly whatever progress has come their way.

The younger generation, on the other hand, has had its appetite for a better life whetted by all recent changes without at the same time acquiring enough of the good things of this world. Some young men had their horizons widened through service overseas with the United States armed forces. Others had made the discovery of the more stimulating and exciting urban world via the movies, television and illustrated magazines. Still others have been to New York or have been influenced by the glamorous accounts of life in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

All observers of Puerto Rican life report the growing restlessness among younger people in the hills of the Island. Only a few weeks ago (on August 6, 1963) Governor Munoz Marin called a meeting of his close associates in order to discuss measures that could be taken to keep the rural youth of Puerto Rico loyal to the calling of their parents and forebears. If one can judge by newspaper reports, the proposed measures would not be much different from those mentioned above, i.e., rural telephones, electricity in the homes, drinking water, part-time jobs in rural areas, etc.

THE IDEALIZATION OF RURAL LIFE BY URBAN PUERTO RICANS

Nineteenth century Puerto Rican writers often portrayed the jíbaro's life in his mountain realm in terms of freedom, closeness to nature, and rural humor and wisdom which allegedly characterized him. Some urban Puerto Ricans have actually never seen their rural countrymen outside of country fairs, church processions, and similar festive occasions.

It is therefore interesting to note that the jíbaro himself has had a much more pedestrian and realistic vision of his existence. He accepted hard work as a necessity of survival but had not evolved a philosophy which would equate work to virtue and idleness to vice. Slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico in 1873 but the psychological linkage between hard work and low status had left its imprint on the Puerto Rican mind. The jíbaro was also taught a realistic view of the value of work by the low wages paid hired laborers or earned by women engaged in needlework.

The urban classes of Puerto Rican society, until very recently, were not able to impress their rural brethern with their own industry. Domestic help was always so cheap on the Island that most city people were completely free from all domestic chores and obligations. The lowest paid government clerks and the least successful professional people lived surrounded by cooks, maids, nurses, and gardeners. Their own professional activities were also marked by short hours, siestas in the middle of the working day, and a general atmosphere of casualness and informality in their shops and offices, with numerous Church and State holidays keeping their working duties to a minimum.

As pointed out above, the jíbaros were always in debt to local storekeepers and to their landlords. A commonly practiced way of keeping their creditors' and benefactors' good will unimpaired was by rendering to them a variety of unremunerated services (trabajo de compromiso). Even the jíbaro children were urged by their parents to wait on their economic superiors' children in order to secure their good will.

The overall hopelessness of the jíbaro's economic condition tended to make him improvident and fatalistic. Thrift and hard work kept him alive but gave him nothing to look forward to. This gap was filled by state lotteries and by extra-legal number games.

Country dances, home-made musical instruments, wood carvings, church processions, and occasional pig-roasting picnics have always been part of rural existence and have added some spice to rural life in Puerto Rico. They could hardly outweigh, however, in the memories of older jíbaros, the pangs of chronic hunger, the high rate of infant mortality, and the miseries of pulmonary and parasitic intestinal afflications which debilitated them and made their lives a source of pain.

SOME AMBIGUITIES OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Before the takeover of Puerto Rico by the United States more than half the population of the Island was illiterate. With its traditional commitment to popular education the United States could have been expected to change this situation. Unfortunately, however, the educational uplifting of the Puerto Rican masses was put at the service of a policy of Anglo-Americanization. As late as in 1930 all subjects were taught in Spanish in the first four grades only. In the fifth grade half the subjects were taught in English, and from the sixth to twelvth grade inclusive all the subjects were taught in English. This policy disregarded the simple truth that poor and "underdeveloped" as Puerto Rico may have been, it possessed all the traditional pride of ancestry and origins that one finds in most human societies and in the Spanish-speaking world in particular.

This policy was unrealistic for other reasons as well. It created a gap between the artificial English-speaking world of the school and the family and the community to which school children belonged. Not many among them ever had a chance to find employment with American firms or get access to English books and periodicals. Only as late as 1949 was Spanish once more made the official language of public instruction. Thus for half a century Puerto Rican public education had been slowed down through a half-hearted and inefficient attempt to turn a Spanish-speaking rural society into fluent users of a foreign tongue.

But even today the public schools of rural Puerto Rico are often viewed as carriers of alien influences by the parents of the growing generation. This is due to the fact that most teachers are themselves of urban origin and approach rural children with values, manners, and speech-forms of urban derivation. If and when they succeed in converting their pupils to their own cultural preferences the parents feel robbed of their offspring. When the teacher fails in changing the child his educational effort may be rated as unsuccessful.

SOME OTHER CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL ORDER

Other changes are taking place in rural Puerto Rico. In the past, natural calamities, sickness, and poverty were met with a pattern of traditional mutuality. This took the form of labor exchange among neighbors. Blood relations as well as ritual kin (i.e. godparents or compadres) could be counted upon to help in an emergency. Orphans and children of working mothers could be left with friends and relatives. Older mothers frequently raised their own children along with their grandchildren. Children of unwed mothers, stepchildren, adopted children - all the children were always looked after by some dutybound or charitable people. Even landowners were known to come to their laborers' assistance under pressing circumstances. Family ties often outlasted marriage. Thus rejected and offended spouses would send old clothes or food to an impoverished former mate or pay a visit to a bed-ridden or imprisoned ex-spouse.

This pattern of personal relations and services is becoming less common as time goes on, and a more individualistic cash-oriented system of values is taking its place. As far as rural youth is concerned this means that they are loosing their commitment to life in the proximity of their immediate family or kin-group and have less of a sentimental attachment to their mountian home than was the case in the past.

THE CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN

In traditional rural Puerto Rico women went through life being subordinated to successive male authorities. The father, the elder brother, the husband, the priest, the landowner - such were the typical embodiments of male authoritarianism. Girls were trained to wait on their brothers just as their mother waited on her husband. The view was widespread that men were naturally sensual and aggressive and that accordingly women were always in need of protection and supervision. In some rural areas all shopping was done by men. At dancing parties most married women were expected to act the part of wallflowers while watching their husbands dance with young unmarried women. Married men as a rule were extremely jealous and many wanted their wives burdened with numerous offspring as a protection against extra-marital affairs.

All these patterns and values have been subjected to the process of erosion during the last two or three decades. Rising levels of literacy, descriptions of recreation in the mass-media, the growing acceptance of birth-control, the spreading influence of the United States society - all of these factors have been whittling away at the traditional status of Puerto Rican women. After several years of schooling most Puerto Rican girls (of rural or urban origin) want to become trained nurses, school teachers, librarians, secretaries, airplane stewardesses, beauticians, seamstresses, etc. Not many would choose life on a farm as a preferred type of existence, although, needless to say, quite a few are forced to stay on land and to become jibaro wives.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The society and the government of Puerto Rico are caught in a vicious circle. If they had the material means of skipping the long traditional phase from backward ruralism to remunerative and urbanized farming (on the pattern of Iowa or Nebraska) the youth of the mountain area would not easily be tempted away from their ancestral homes.

What is taking place in today's rural Puerto Rico is the very opposite of such a miracle. The material and the educational changes offered to rural populations are not sufficiently impressive to make continued life on the land an exciting prospect. At the same time these changes serve as an invitation to the seemingly more glamorous life of the cities (in Puerto Rico as well as in the continental United States) and a massive rural exodus has been set in motion.

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